

THE SANCTUARY

The Sanctuary is situated approximately three quarters of a mile West of the Stourbridge Basin and the Bonded Warehouse in Canal Street. It is the name given by locals to the area at the end of Aldridge Close which lies behind the Junction, Audnam.

The Junction was built by Guests in 1829. It consists of two blocks of cottages which front the canal tow path. There is an entry between the two blocks

The houses in the Sanctuary either belong to the Sanctuary Housing Association or Spiral Housing Association and residents may rent their properties with an option to buy.



Fig. 1 The Junction looking West

Aldridge Close is a cul de sac which abuts the towing path of the Stourbridge Arm Canal. It was adopted by the Local Authority in 1983, with the exception of the last two houses in the Close.

There is a wooden paling fence which separates the housing estate from the towing path. Often there are holes smashed in this fence where locals have created "desire lines" to conveniently access the towing path. At the Western end of the Junction is gap of some two metres between the end of the Junction and the fence. When the Close was built, this fence was continuous, forming a demarcation between the development and the canal.

- It is here that antisocial and criminal elements access the towing path.
- The garden of the end property has been raided several times and as a consequence the wall has been raised and razor wire installed to keep out undesirables. The resident has even had the contents of his garden

- pond stolen.
- Residents have also reported frequent problems with motorbikes being ridden through the gap and along the towing path.
- They are keen to see the gap closed to these anti social elements.
- At the beginning of April 2009, one of the residents of Aldridge Close tidied up and replanted the border of the gap.
- To back the residents' claims of criminal and anti social behaviour, the local Crime Prevention Officer, stationed at Kingswinford, was contacted in May 2009.

The following facts emerged:

1. As a Traffic officer he was trained to ride off road motorbikes. As a result he has had considerable experience dealing with illegal off road motorbikes, especially on the Kinver Street playing fields and the canal towing path.
2. This has led to gaining a depth of knowledge and understanding of the antisocial behaviour exhibited at these sites and the mindset of offenders.
3. Catching motorcyclists is not always easy. When the police have a crime 'blitz' targeting illegal motorcyclists, they have a habit of disappearing until the police leave the area.
4. The figures for anti social behaviour, are of necessity, sparse. There is little recorded evidence due either to people putting up with the situation or accepting it as being normal rather than reporting it.
5. However he does have anecdotal evidence as family members live adjoining the canal. They report there *is* a lot of motorbike activity.
6. Based on his years of experience and the knowledge of offenders' attitudes, he is of the firm opinion that if the tow path barriers are opened motorbikes will be ridden the whole length of the Stourbridge Arm.



Fig. 2 The gap in Aldridge Close Oct 2008



Fig.3 The gap tidied up April 2009



*Fig. 4 The tidied border seen from Aldridge Close.
The gap can be clearly seen.*

Whose Responsibility Is It?

The key to the problem is finding out who the land belongs to.

- The line of the fence is outside the boundary of the towing path. Thus it does not belong to British Waterways.
- In 1983 Aldridge Close was taken over by the Local Authority, except for the last two houses.
- It would appear that the land where the gap is situated is the responsibility of the developer/Housing Association.

Points to Consider

Notwithstanding whoever first made the gap, the residents of Rushall Close, Aldridge Close and Richardson Drive now use this as a convenient access point to the canal. It is well used at most times of the day especially by parents taking their children to the nearby primary school. Thus completely closing the gap will cause considerable inconvenience to users. Besides which an "unofficial access" can be easily forced.

The available options are:

1. Close the gap completely. The problems with this are:
 - Residents will have to walk round to the ramp at Longboat Lane Bridge. The ramp itself is stepped, overgrown with weeds and nettles and is awkward to negotiate. It means an increase in distance of some 200m to reach the same point. No one seems to know who is responsible for its upkeep.
 - Anti social people who do not wish to go round may smash a hole in the fence to create a "desire line" thus defeating the object of the exercise.
 - The advantage is that nothing will get through. (Of course in some

circumstances this could be a disadvantage. e.g. allowing access for emergency vehicles.)



Fig.5 The ramp at Longboat Lane Bridge

2. Install a RADAR gate. This will prevent motorcycles from accessing the towing path. Disabled people will experience difficulties in getting their vehicles through, as will people with pushchairs or prams.
3. Install a motorcycle trap, but again this would debar the disabled and families with prams and pushchairs. A skilled motorcyclist can ride over or through such a device – especially with a 'trials' bike. Their usefulness is therefore limited.
4. Use an 'A' frame to control access. Worcestershire County Council made wide use of these in the late 1990's and early 'noughties' but are now in the process of removing them. If they are wide enough to allow mobility scooters to pass through then motorbikes could do so as well. In addition they often form places for youths to congregate and intimidate those passing through.
5. Gate the gap and have the gate open during certain times of the day. The problems with this are:
 - Motorbikes can access the canal when the gates are open.
 - Who takes responsibility for opening and closing the gates?
 - Gates can be pulled down to create a "desire line".
6. Install 'squeeze points'. Posts could be concreted in place to allow people to pass through but not motorbikes. They would have to be high enough and pointed to prevent anybody from sitting on them.

Notes

With any problem there is no perfect solution. No one solution will suit all circumstances. "One size does not fit all." Often the solution to one problem in itself causes a new problem.

None of the above suggestions will really address the problems of crime, or antisocial behaviour. Criminals will always find a means of reaching the canal; there are too many easy access points for them to do so. The Dudley Borough Local Access Forum can only offer advice about access affecting the motorbike problem.

The final decision rests either with Dudley Council or whoever owns the land.

Any other problems, such as burglary, must be referred either to the Police or the local Crime Prevention Officer who is stationed at the Kingswinford Police Station.

All that can be suggested is ways to "close the door" to the illegal use of motorbikes on the towing path and give a greater sense of security to those living on the canal.

Also, all the above suggestions can make life more awkward, if not downright impossible, for the disabled and possibly for those with prams and pushchairs.

The most effective barriers are also the most expensive.

It must also be stressed that those who live on or adjacent to the canal are most at risk from crime and antisocial behaviour. All reasonable steps must be taken to protect their best interests in terms of security and the maintenance of good health. Noisy machines running up and down the towing path, especially late at night, are not conducive to people's well being.

Any group who uses the canal and who wish to consider this issue should take note of the above remarks and the rubric below.

ADVICE

Install the most appropriate and cost effective method of barring motorcycles from accessing the towpath as soon as is reasonably possible.

(Question – what can be done to help the disabled? They form the group which is the most adversely affected by any of the above arrangements.)

RUBRIC

Dudley Borough Local Access Forum was formed under the auspices of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

Its brief is to advise the Local Authority on access matters.

It is composed of volunteers half of whom are *landowners* while the other half is *access users*.

Council officers are present at meetings to advise members.

Councillors from the three main political parties also attend.

Although Forum members come from a variety of activities they do not represent their own specialisms i.e. they are not partisan. Instead they use their expertise to advise on all the access matters which may be drawn to their attention. In addition DEFRA encourages the Forum to be proactive and to draw the Council's attention to situations which may potentially be of interest.

By law Dudley Council is obliged to take note of the Access Forum's advice and to acknowledge it, but does not necessarily have to act upon it.

Signed: David Woodruff - Vice Chair DBLAF June 2009